

Israel Military Intelligence: The Lavon Affair

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The Lavon Affair is a spy story in Israel's early years that left a nasty mark on the young state, with reverberations for the following 20 years. It's name derived from Israeli Defense Minister [Pinhas Lavon](#), though it is also referred to as "*Esek HaBish*" or "The Mishap".

Revolving around nearly a dozen young Egyptian Jews who agreed to spy for Israel against their home country, the affair taps into a story of idealism and self-sacrifice as well as abandonment and an unwillingness to take responsibility.

Due to strict censorship in Israel in the early 1950's, few knew that in the year 1954 Israeli underground cells that had been operating in [Egypt](#) were uncovered by the Egyptian police. A number of young Jews were arrested and forced to undergo a show trial. Two of them - Yosef Carmon and Max Binnet - committed suicide in prison due to the brutal interrogation methods of the Egyptian police. Two more - Dr. [Moshe Marzouk](#) of [Cairo](#) and Shmuel Azar of [Alexandria](#) - were sentenced to death and hanged in a Cairo prison. Israel glorified them as martyrs. Their memory was sanctified. Neighborhoods and gardens were named after them in Israel, as were dozens of children born in the year 1955. At the same time it was not publicly conceded that they died in the service of Israel. The other six heroes of the "Esek HaBish" were far less prominently known. They were sentenced to long jail terms, where they languished for years. Two of them, Meir Meyuhas and Meir Za'afan, were released in 1962, after having served seven year jail sentences. Shrouded in secrecy, they reached Israel where their arrival was not made public, and journalists were not allowed to interview them. Sworn to silence, they reconstructed their lives to the best of their ability, far from the spotlight.

That left four more "Zionist spies," as they came to be called in Egypt. Marcelle Ninio, a woman, and Robert Dassa, both sentenced to 15 years' imprisonment, and Victor Levy and Philip Nathanson, who were sentenced for life. Marcelle Ninio was kept on her own in the women's prison in Kanather. The men were jailed together for fourteen years, mainly in the Tura prison.

Why would such young Jews risk their lives for an Arab country in which they were born, for a country - Israel - which until 1952 they had never seen? And why would Israel decide to open up a cell of native Jews to spy for them?

For Israel, sources of information were drying up in Egypt after the [War of Independence](#) of 1948. Perhaps more than half of Egypt's approximately 80,000 [Jews had left](#) for Israel by mid-1950. Egyptian Muslims were more openly hostile and distrustful of those Jews who remained, which led

many Jews to sever any connection they had with Israel. Israel thus needed sources of information. More than that, by the early 1950's Egyptian nationalist agitation against the British presence in Egypt and especially in the Suez Canal Zone was intensifying. Britain was speaking openly about leaving Egypt as she had from Palestine a few years before, in 1948. British troops in the Canal Zone were living in similar conditions to those in Palestine by the end of the Mandate - behind barbed wire in protected zones.

The Israelis, meanwhile, did not want the British to leave. The British presence guaranteed a buffer of sorts to an attempted Egyptian invasion of Israel. With the British gone, there would be nothing to stand between Egypt and Israel but the vast wastelands of the Sinai.

Thus the Israelis approached a number of native Egyptian Jews, who recruited others, usually from among their own social circle. These Egyptian Jews were ready to spy against Egypt because they never regarded themselves, nor did others regard them, as Egyptians. They attended Jewish schools, their social contacts were limited almost exclusively to Jews, and most of them did not even hold Egyptian citizenship.

Unlike other Middle Eastern Jewish communities, the perhaps 80,000 pre-1948 [Egyptian Jewish population](#) had shallow roots. Many Jews had arrived in Egypt only in the second half of the 19th century or the beginning of the 20th. Some settled in Egypt while on the way to Palestine from Yemen or North Africa. Others were former Ottoman Jews, hailing from all over the pre World War I [Ottoman Middle Eastern Empire](#).

Egypt even became somewhat of a haven for Jews expelled from Palestine by the Turks during World War I. [David Ben-Gurion](#) was one of the many Palestinian Jews who spent time in Egypt during the war years of 1914-18. After the war, some Jews even came from Eastern Europe, fleeing from the Communist revolution. While many of them would have preferred to go to America or Palestine, they were unable to so they remained in Egypt. Like other foreign colonies, such as the Italians and Greeks, the Jews lived in Egypt without really striking roots. They lived mainly in their own neighborhoods in Cairo and Alexandria (as well as in a number of cities close to the Suez Canal), they attended their own schools, and spoke their own languages. As many of them were fairly well educated, they spoke French, the language of culture, and English, the language of Government. (The British remained in Egypt from 1882-1956, and ruled for much of that period). Many of them could not even read or write in Arabic, and spoke only a very basic Arabic.

Moshe Marzouk, an extremely bright young man studying to be a doctor when he entered the spy ring, was born in Cairo to the [Karaites](#) sect. The Karaites are a Jewish sect founded in Persia in the 8th century CE, recognizing only the written Bible - meaning the Torah, the Prophets, and the Writings. The Karaites reject the oral, [Talmudic tradition](#) and thus the authority of the rabbis to interpret Jewish Scripture. "The movement flourished between the 10th and 12th centuries, spreading to Palestine, from there to Egypt and Syria, and into Europe by way of Spain and Byzantium." In their rejection of the Oral tradition, the Karaites are similar to the Samaritans, a tiny sect living on Mount Gerizim in the West Bank (or Judaea and Samaria). The Samaritans accept only the [Five Books of Moses](#), rejecting the [Prophets](#) and [Writings](#).

The Karaites in Egypt regarded themselves as Jews, as did the Egyptian Jewish community as a whole. The Karaite quarter bordered the Jewish Quarter of Cairo's Old City and was part of it. Like other Jews, the Karaites dreamed of Israel and took part in Zionist activity, whether legal or illegal (as it often was in Egypt by the 1940's). At the same time the Karaites mixed more with the Egyptian population as a whole, and Arabic was their first language. They were thus more integrated than other Jews. Some even bore Arabic names.

Moshe Marzouk's family came to Egypt from Tunisia at the beginning of the 20th century. His family retained their French citizenship, which was very common practice for Jews living in North African countries in the 19th and 20th centuries. In 1948, during Israel's War of Independence, there were attacks and even bombings by Egyptians on the Jewish sections of Egyptian cities. Moshe Marzouk was approached about organizing Jewish self-defense in Cairo in 1948, which he agreed to. Later, he worked helping Egyptian Jews emigrate to Israel.

Shmuel Azar, Victor Levy and Robert Dassa were born in Alexandria, a much more cosmopolitan

city than Cairo. One could hear French, Italian and Greek as much as Arabic in Alexandria's broad, straight thoroughfares lined by French style buildings..

All three boys were born in Egypt. Robert Dassa's family was one of those that settled in Egypt on the way from Yemen to Palestine. In his pictures in prison, Robert, with his jet-black hair, dark complexion and mustache looked the most Egyptian of all.

Victor, Robert, and Philip Nathanson (another member of the spy ring) were all 16 in 1948, and all involved in [Zionist](#) activity. Shmuel Azar was four years older and not really part of their social group until later.

The espionage story began in the very early 1950's when the Israelis sent an undercover agent to Egypt by the name of Avraham Dar. He went by the name John Darling, posing as a British citizen of the island of Gibraltar. He taught the Egyptian Jewish spy ring about underground organizations and conspiratorial tactics. They learned how to make delayed action devices, letter bombs, and the intricacies of photography. In early 1952 most of them came to Israel - secretly, of course - in order to learn sabotage and underground techniques. Most of them fell in love with Israel and vowed to do whatever they could to help.

At a farewell party for the small number of Egyptian Jews who participated in the course, they decided to call what they would be called upon to do "Operation Susannah." It was partly in jest, named after Victor Levy's fiancée, whose name was Susan Kauffman. She went with him to Israel and stayed. The spies were to return to Egypt, and they would know when to go into action when they would hear an Israel radio broadcast of the American song "Oh! Susannah."

Victor Levy left for Egypt in August 1952. On the way back to Egypt he first stopped off in Paris and then other locations in France in order to learn more about manufacturing explosives and some photography.

An Israeli agent by the name of Avraham Seidenberg was sent to take over the organization of the spy ring from his predecessor, Avraham Dar. Seidenberg was a good choice for such a dangerous mission - taking into account that he was an Israeli unlike the Egyptian Jews, and thus had more of a chance of his cover being blown. Yet he had little to lose. He had been caught looting Arab property during Israel's War of Independence and had never been able to rehabilitate himself in public life. His marriage, too, was on the rocks, and thus he was quite happy to be offered something that could lead to new vistas and opportunities.

Seidenberg was first sent to Germany to establish a false identity as a former SS officer by the name of Paul Frank. He successfully infiltrated the ranks of the underground former Nazi network. He set out for Egypt in early 1954, his new identity established. "He chalked up a number of successes, uncovering the underground route by which wanted Nazi war criminals slipped through to the Arab states, as well as supplying the first reports about Egyptian efforts to establish an arms industry with the help of German experts." Once he arrived in Egypt he began recruiting further members of the Egyptian Jewish community. Marcelle Ninio was one of those who were captivated by his show of confidence and by the fact that he was an Israeli. The other members of the cell - who all knew each other, which was an unfortunate portent and a major mistake in terms of organizing espionage operations - agreed to work for him as well. On July 2, 1954, they went into action. They first blew up some post offices and a few days later, the American libraries in Cairo and Alexandria. These operations were to "make it clear to the whole world that Egypt's new rulers were nothing but a group of foolhardy extremists, unreliable and unworthy of taking charge of an asset as important as the Suez Canal. Furthermore, it was to be demonstrated that their grasp on power was uncertain, that they faced powerful internal opposition, and, consequently, they were unworthy of being counted upon as a dependable ally."

Robert Dassa was one of the first of the spies to be caught. Philip Nathanson was caught soon after when, on the way to blow up a cinema in Alexandria, the bomb he was carrying in his pocket ignited and then exploded. What was a particularly alarming factor was that outside of the theater a fire engine was waiting, as if expecting them. Philip had the distinct feeling he was being watched. It turned out that he had been.

As Philip lay on the ground, he saw startled and frightened faces looking down at him. While somebody shouted "Take care! He may have another bomb!" Philip heard a police sergeant say "Don't worry, don't worry. We were waiting for them. These are the people who set fire to the American library." He was taken by ambulance to a hospital. After being lightly treated, he was interrogated by members of Egypt's military intelligence, the Muhabarrat. The others were caught soon after - Shmuel Azar, Philip Nathanson, Robert Dassa, and Marcelle Ninio. None of them had been prepared by their Israeli handlers for this eventuality.

They refused to implicate one another. At first, they didn't even admit to the bombings. When the police brought Philip Nathanson to his house with incriminating material, which were sure to implicate him, Philip continued to maintain that he was innocent of all charges. As he recalls being brought to his house; ""The house was overflowing with policemen and detectives in and out of uniform. They took me straight to the garden, and to the workshop in the garden hut. This too was so crowded there was no room for me, and I remained standing on the threshold...The policemen had piled the table with Vim cans, chemicals, and the fine scales I used for weighing them. With each item they found, they asked me: 'What's this? What's it for?'"

'I told them I was manufacturing dyes.'

'Sure,' said the governor sarcastically. 'There's a good market for them, praise be to Allah.'"

The police took everything they could from his house, even a fork and a spoon, to be used as evidence against them. Victor Levy, Robert Dassa and Philip Nathanson held up to the persistent questioning, threats, and occasional beatings. They maintained that they were Communists who wanted the British imperialists out of Egypt. This even earned them the admiration and respect from the Egyptians, who also wanted the British out. That is, until Shmuel Azar, who was constitutionally incapable of telling a lie, admitted that they were Jews and Zionists working on behalf of the State of Israel. Thereafter, the whole network was rounded up and arrested by August 5, 1954. "Paul Frank", or Avraham Seidenberg, meanwhile, did nothing, and left Egypt only on August 5, when Meir Meyuhas and Moshe Marzouk were arrested.

In Israel, Seidenberg got a hero's welcome as the only member of the network who had gotten away. Meanwhile, Marcelle Ninio waited nervously, not knowing what to do, wishing to leave, but unable to do so. Seidenberg never got back in contact with her, and in fact appeared to be very relaxed about the whole ordeal. He had even encouraged the Egyptian Jews to stay put before they were arrested. It was only years later that they began to question Seidenberg's role in the story. Israeli Intelligence began to suspect him much earlier.

The "Zionist spies," as they came to be called, hadn't been well treated before they admitted they had been working on behalf of Israel. But it was bearable. That all changed after their association with Israel was known. Marcelle Ninio was arrested and beaten mercilessly on the soles of her feet, she was threatened with sexual abuse, and it didn't let up. The torture became so unbearable that at one point she threw herself out of a window and nearly died. She only just managed to survive. She was taken to a hospital where she was allowed to heal.

The men were transferred from Alexandria to Cairo, where the prison guards were known to be even more savage than their Alexandrian counterparts. They were taken to the Sigan Harbi, a prison notorious for its cruelty - a reputation the guards there very much wanted to maintain. When they were marched down the stinking and decrepit hallways, in chains, they could hear cries coming out of the other cells. In the near future those cries would sometimes be of their friends. This went on day and night. Treatment was something akin to a medieval torture chamber. Moreover, there were rivalries between the police and prison guards on the one side, and the Muhabarrat (military intelligence) on the other. Both sides wanted to prove that they could extract more information than the other.

The prison guards would sometimes hang the prisoners up with their arms tied behind their heads, and beat the prisoners savagely until they fainted, and sometimes even died. The truth is that this treatment was not only meted out to the Jewish spies - Egyptian members of the Muslim Brotherhood, who were fierce opponents of Nasser's secular, socialist, military regime - received exactly the same treatment, and sometimes even worse. At one point one of the higher level prison

guards, after savagely beating a member of the Muslim Brotherhood, called in Robert Dassa. The guard told him to beat the Moslem Brother. "Now, I am going to let a Jew beat you."

Robert refused. The Moslem Brotherhood member's eyes, cringing with fear, softened a little. The guards turned on Robbie savagely and told him to beat the prisoner or else. He wouldn't. A gang of guards then set upon Robbie, savagely beating him, while the Moslem Brother pleaded with the guards to stop beating Robbie. As long as he could, Robbie stoically refused to cry out and give the guards any kind of satisfaction.

After months of this kind of treatment they were finally brought to trial. The verdict was predetermined from the start, a fact which was known as long ago as 1956. The sentences were a compromise between the extremists of the new government, who wanted all of the spies put to death, and those more moderate members of the government, "who preferred to win the world's sympathy for their regime by a more humane approach. This is confirmed by the court's presiding judge, Gen. Fuad el Digwi, when he fell into Israeli captivity during the 1956 campaign. At the time he was the military governor of the Gaza Strip. He told his interrogators: 'The verdict was dictated to me by my supervisors, who decided how many were to be sentenced to death, how many to imprisonment, and for what terms.'"

The trial went on for two weeks. As a show trial, it was staged for two purposes. "Abroad, it was to stress the story that 'Israel tried to undermine Egyptian-American friendship'; at home, it would show that the regime's severity was not confined to the Moslem Brotherhood alone." As we discussed above, the Nasser regime treated the Moslem Brothers as badly as the Jewish spies.

The trial was given "unusual publicity." The press emphasized again and again how dangerous the 'Israeli' spies were to Egypt, and demanded severe punishment. Naturally, the press pronounced the Jews guilty before the court did. Such intensive and ongoing press coverage had a deeply demoralizing effect on the families of the imprisoned Jewish spies. In court, however, they showed smiles of encouragement from the spectators' gallery, as did the spies themselves. Marcelle Ninio was completely healed by then - it is unlikely they would have permitted her to be shown to the outside world in any other way.

Moshe Marzouk publicly took responsibility for the group and everything that they had done. The presiding Military Judge, General Digwi was taken aback by the admission. On only one point did Moshe concede to his companions' pleas not to reveal more about their activities; and that was not to admit that they had undergone military training in Israel.

After the trial the men were transferred to Tura Prison. Moshe Marzouk and Shmuel Azar were sentenced to be hanged. Massive world pressure was applied on the Egyptian Government not to hang the two condemned men. American President Eisenhower intervened, as did the Indian President Nehru - and even the Pope. The Egyptians, aware of the American hangings of the Rosenbergs, Jewish Americans who had spied on behalf of the Soviet Union, responded; "Egypt (will) treat its spies in precisely the same manner adopted by the United States." Moshe Marzouk and Shmuel Azar were hanged in early 1955.

Marcelle Ninio was sentenced to 15 years in the women's prison of Kanather - the longest sentence ever for a women political prisoner in Egypt. The previous high had been 8 years.

After the hangings of Moshe Marzouk and Shmuel Azar, relations between Egypt and Israel considerably worsened. Palestinian infiltration from Gaza into Israel, with Egyptian connivance, considerably increased, as did Israeli retaliatory raids. Border tensions were reflected in the prison. The Egyptian guards frequently incited the Moslem prisoners against their fellow Jewish prisoners. When the prisoners were sent out to the quarries to undergo grueling, back-breaking labor cutting and hauling rocks, the "Zionist spies" were under constant threat of falling rocks loosened by ill-intentioned fellow prisoners. The Jews did have an advantage, however; Robbie was known in their old prison (the Sigan Harbi), as someone who had helped the Moslem Brothers who had been tortured by the prison authorities. They saw that he refused to beat a fellow prisoner and had been beaten in return. He also helped many other prisoners beaten so badly that they could hardly walk to get back and forth to the bathroom when they needed to.

In theory, while the Moslem Brothers should have hated Robbie and his fellow Jewish prisoners, they recognized what he had done for them. When he was transferred to Tura, word was passed that Robert had helped the Moslem Brotherhood, and that henceforth he was to be treated as one of them. In fact, Robert and the other Jewish prisoners formed friendships with men whom, on the outside, they would have been bitter enemies with.

It is almost touching to see how the Jewish prisoners, in jail, formed relations with other prisoners who were fully aware of the fact that they had been caught and sentenced for spying for Israel. Although tensions heated up during the [1956 war](#), after it many Moslem guards and prisoners told the Jewish prisoners that they had every reason to be released in a prisoner exchange, and wished them the best.

It seemed logical that they would be released; Israel held 5000 Egyptian prisoners after her conquest of the Sinai. But they traded them all back for one Israeli pilot. Israel didn't even ask for the spies. It is not clear why this was the case. Either Israel did not want to ask, and thereby admit their involvement in the affair (which could have endangered Israel's relations with the United States); or else the Israelis simply didn't want to get involved. Many of the Israelis originally involved in the "Lavon Affair" or "Esek HaBish" had been forced out of office and no longer wanted anything to do with it. They didn't raise their voices in protest over the abandonment of the spies; they simply didn't bring the subject up. Whatever the case, the spies continued to languish in prison, long after the last of the Egyptian prisoners returned home.

One person who became convinced that something had gone amiss, and that people in Israel were to blame - was [David Ben-Gurion](#). In a Commission of Inquiry into the Affair published in December 1960, Pinhas Lavon, (the Defense Minister at the time of the capture of the spies in 1954) was declared not guilty of authorizing the operation. All the ministers in Ben-Gurion's accepted this ruling except for Ben-Gurion himself. A bitter debate ensued which subsequently went on for years. But by then most of those involved in the affair had been removed from their posts. Motke Ben-Tzur, head of a section of Military Intelligence in 1954, had been dismissed in October of that year. Pinhas Lavon resigned from the post of Defense Minister on January 2, 1955. Binyamin Gibli, the Director of military Intelligence, was replaced as well.

The only man to emerge unscathed was Avraham Seidenberg, alias "Paul Frank," alias "Robert", who was subsequently referred to in Israel as "the Third Man". He had given the order to the cell to act - and he was the only one who escaped. As we saw, he returned to a hero's welcome in Israel, his role in the affair unquestioned at the time. Israeli Intelligence even sent him on another mission to Germany.

Isser Harel served as head of the Shin Bet and the Mossad from 1952-1963. He became a giant in early Israeli intelligence, responsible for the capture of [Adolph Eichmann](#) and many other operations, as we shall see in a few weeks. Isser Harel was known to act on his instincts - which often proved him correct. He began to suspect Seidenberg. He ordered Seidenberg back from Germany, and then removed him from Intelligence in October 1956. But Seidenberg was still not arrested or even accused of anything at the time.

To soften the blow, Seidenberg was asked to write reports on his activities in Egypt and Germany. He was given access to archives, and years later, it was discovered that he took some of the top-secret documents he then had access to. He served a short prison term, but after his discharge, his father in Austria became ill and Avraham Seidenberg went to visit him. In fact he went several times. He was, however, forbidden from entering Germany. He went anyway, and he made contact with Nuri Otman, an Egyptian. Seidenberg let it be known that he was prepared to sell important information to Egypt for a sizable payment.

Isser Harel started checking on Seidenberg. He confirmed that Seidenberg was not authorized to go to Germany or to make contact with a foreign agent. "'We came to the conclusion' said Harel, 'that his unlawful contacts with Nuri Otman - as deputy commander of military intelligence and head of the Egyptian Army's security services - had been in direct charge of investigating the activities of the 'Zionist network' in 1954.'" This meant that Seidenberg might very well have been a double agent working for Egypt as well as Israel. By implication this meant that he might have turned over the Jewish spy network to his Egyptian handlers, and permitted them to be caught and then jailed while

he got away.

Isser Harel tricked Seidenberg to come back to Israel by offering him a nice position business-wise, while maintaining a connection with Intelligence. Seidenberg did come back to Israel at the end of 1957.

A senior Intelligence officer interviewed Seidenberg about a new position, while two other senior Intelligence officers concealed themselves "in the neighboring room with the door slightly ajar... When Avraham Seidenberg settled in his chair, the interviewing officer presented the first question: 'Tell me, Avry, could you swear by everything holy that you have never spied against the state of Israel?'

Avry hesitated for a brief moment before launching on his predictable string of denials. That moment sealed his fate." Under interrogation he denied everything. Many investigative committees were appointed. They concluded that not only had he committed perjury, but that the heads of Intelligence services had induced witnesses such as Seidenberg to commit perjury, they had lied themselves and had committed forgeries in 1954.

Investigations in his home turned up bundles of illegal, highly sensitive intelligence material. He went on trial for that and was convicted. (Nevertheless, a committee was unable to find sufficient legal material to try Seidenberg for betraying his colleagues to the Egyptian police in 1954). He claimed that the whole Intelligence Services was conspiring against him and only he was telling the truth. The court did not accept that and he was sentenced to ten years' imprisonment.

After serving his ten years as an exemplary prisoner, he was released, and briefly sold television sets in Tel-Aviv before emigrating to California in 1972, still denying everything.

All of the political rumblings were reported in the Egyptian press. From there the news filtered down to the prison. Guards and prisoners once again became hostile to them. This treatment did not last long as they went on an 11-day hunger strike, which led to better treatment. In general, they were well liked and respected, even in those tense times, by the rest of the guards and prisoners.

They had many skills that they put to good use in prison - such as photography, gardening, painting, playing basketball - and raising animals. When one of the guards saw one of Robert's paintings, he wanted one. Soon enough all the other guards did as well. In return, they would do favors for him. When they saw Victor or Philip gardening, they wanted gardens in front of their own workplaces as well. It is rather bizarre, knowing of the often vicious nature of the Arab-Israeli conflict, that one finds the status of the Jewish spies so high in Egyptian prisons. Their raising of ducks and parakeets within the prison particularly impressed the prison administration.

The duck farm was a rather amusing story in itself. Once one of the ducks began hatching eggs, they decided to ask the notoriously cruel administrator to give them an incubator. The Mudir (administrator), Immara - was enthusiastic about the project. Victor gave him a mother and three little ducks, and Immara would go every day "to feast his eyes on them." Moreover, he supported Victor's project wholeheartedly. "Anything I requested for the ducklings was provided. No sooner did I see that a rearing house was needed than carpenters were summoned and the structure went up before my very eyes. Two convicts were placed at my disposal, to grind up the food scraps from the kitchen. When the ducklings grew feathers and their time came to leave the rearing house, Immara ordered the orchestra to vacate the two rooms behind the amphitheater where it used to hold rehearsals. The rooms were converted into duck runs." Victor continued: "After a year or two, the duck farm ran the whole length of the prison wall." There was a school building attached to the prison, but "Immara ordered the pupils out and placed three of the classrooms at my disposal, to serve as rearing-rooms, this time, equipped with electric stoves. The incubator hut was now fitted out with three up-to-date incubators operating simultaneously. The kitchen scraps no longer sufficed, but Immara did not hesitate to requisition the convicts' bran to feed the ducks."

Immara was a very strange character. The spies knew him from another prison, ten years before, where he had been notoriously brutal, savage and cruel to the prisoners. When he came to Tura he was determined to prove himself again. He took away the accumulated belongings most prisoners had accrued in their cells. When he first arrived at Tura and saw the spies' cell, he smiled, asked

how they were, didn't seem bothered by the birds twittering around in their cell, and moved on. He didn't conduct a search or confiscate a thing.

Soon after he made everyone vacate their cells and move into new ones with the exception of the Jews. Other prisoners questioned his behavior. The Jews didn't know what to make of him themselves. For a long time they assumed he showed favoritism to them because they acquired Swiss medicines for him from the outside, which were unavailable in Egypt. But this was not the only reason. "Only years later, on the eve of his release, when Victor went to Immara to say good-bye, did the Mudir reveal a further reason for the change in his attitude towards them. His brother-in-law, while serving as an army doctor at El Arish, had been taken prisoner during the Sinai campaign, and was treated well by the Israelis. 'To this day, he tells me how well your people behaved toward him.' Immara took it upon himself to repay in kind."

Immara grew to have complete confidence in Victor in particular, mainly because of the duck farm. "Matters reached such a point that even guards punished by the Mudir for some offense would plead with Victor: 'He docked me ten days' pay and I don't have enough to feed my children as it is. Please, do something for me.'" With Robert Dassa running the prison basketball team, Victor in charge of gardening and the duck farm and gardening, and Philip Nathanson holding several important posts, they all "enjoyed a position of exclusivity, with considerable freedom of movement." Their renown extended far outside the prison walls. "In Cairo's Sigan Misr, which served as a transit station for prisoners sentenced to hard labor, old lags would advise (new) prisoners on their way to Tura: 'When you get there, try to contact the three Jewish spies. They're the mukhtars (headmen) of the prison. If they want to, they can be of great help to you.'" It brings to mind the story of Joseph, thrown into Pharaoh's dungeons, rising to become the headmen of his prison in Egypt more than 3000 years before.

Comparatively, Marcelle Ninio did well for herself as well. People who liked her supplied her with a radio and books. She obtained writing paper and envelopes and tried her best to keep in contact with the males in the Tura prison. She also made some real friends in the prison, particularly among the nurses.

Near the end of their imprisonment the Israeli spy Wolfgang Lotz was thrown into Tura with them as well. Everyone, including the Jew, thought he was a German who had spied on behalf of Israel. After he revealed the truth to them, they took him into their inner circle, as they had done with a select group of other prisoners. Lutz, even though he had been convicted of spying for Israel, won over the guards and prisoners at Tura, just as Robert, Victor, and Philip had.

As tensions increased during the countdown to the [1967 war](#), there were rumors that the Jewish prisoners might be harmed. Immara made sure that didn't happen.

Israel achieved a tremendous victory in 1967. This time, Israel didn't forget her spies. Although it took months, they were finally released in February 1968. The prison guards, administration, and even many of the prisoners wished them well. They all built new lives for themselves in Israel - albeit quietly, with little fanfare. It was only some time after President Nasser's death in 1970 that the Jewish spies came forth publicly to tell their story.

[Ed. In March 2005, nearly 40 years after their release from Egyptian prisons, Marcelle Ninio, Robert Dassa, and Meir Zafran were given military ranks in the [IDF](#) in recognition of their service to the State of Israel. They are the last three surviving members of Operation Susannah, and are finally receiving awards for their years of suffering. It took several years for Israel to acknowledge that it had trained a group of Egyptian Jews to carry out espionage activities in Cairo and Alexandria. The group was released in February 1968, but was unknown to the Israeli public until 1971 when [Golda Meir](#) announced she would attend Ninio's wedding. Dassa believes that his rank is the culmination of the wishes of his deceased comrades, who wanted the survivors not to rest "until the State of Israel recognizes all of us."]

Sources: [The Pedagogic Center](#), [The Department for Jewish Zionist Education](#), [The Jewish Agency for Israel](#), (c) 1992-2005, Director: Dr. Motti Friedman, Webmaster: Esther Carciente. This material may not be republished without the permission of the copyright owner.

- 1) Ian Black and Benny Morris - *Israel's Secret Wars: A History of Israel's Intelligence Services*
 - 2) Aviezer Golan - *Operation Susannah*
 - 3) Dan Raviv and Yossi Melman - *Every Spy a Prince: The Complete History of Israel's Intelligence Community.*
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